

Story of 6 Women

They Like To Be The Judge



Helen McGillicuddy

BY PATRICIA DALTON

The U.S. Supreme Court building has no women's dressing room, but they might as well start fixing up a place.

It's probably just a matter of time before women hit the top, the way things are going.

Today, 300 of the nation's 8,748 judges are women.

Six of these women sit in Chicago's courtrooms.

Chicago's municipal court system — with its 2,500,000 cases a year; its 148 judges and associate judges, and its 83 magistrates — is the world's largest.

The head of it is Judge Augustine Bowe, who says:

"People laughed at any woman who appeared in a courtroom when I started to practice law 50 years ago. Now women match up on the whole with any of the judges we have."

Bowe said, "By the very nature of things, women can give another viewpoint.

"We can use them anywhere, and I expect that before long, we'll appoint a lot more of them."

If you ask any little girl you know what she wants to be when she grows up, probably not one will answer "a judge."

NONE OF Chicago's six women judges intended to be one, either.

"You just don't think about it, any more than you think of becoming a Pope," says Mrs. Margaret O'Malley, spirited, ash blond magistrate in Family Court.

Explained Chicago-born Mrs. O'Malley: "I always wanted to be a lawyer, though,

and I guess every lawyer would like to become a judge."

A woman gets to be a judge the same way a man does, but the climb to the bench is more steep.

"A woman has to be better qualified," said Miss B. Fain Tucker, a throaty-voiced woman with twinkling eyes who sits in Equity Court.

"There is no ready place for them — no one has a posse out for a woman judge."

To get where they are, Chicago's six women judges started with a law degree, and the climb involved at least six years of law practice, 30 references, membership in many professional organizations, and screening by a Chicago Bar Assn. committee.

Mrs. Marilyn Komosa remembers this screening well.

She was one of the 750 candidates for 83 judicial positions open last fall. Each candidate



Marilyn Komosa



Helen Kelleber



Margaret O'Malley



Edith Sampson



B. Fain Tucker

had to walk into a room and sit in a chair surrounded by 40 bar association members for a grilling on legal matters. The candidates had to do this before they could be recommended for selection by a committee of Circuit Court judges.

"It was only for about 10 minutes, but it seemed much longer," recalls Mrs. Komosa, who at 33 is the youngest of the city's women judges.

Miss Tucker, elected in 1953 on the Republican ticket, became Chicago's first woman judge since the retirement of Mary Bartelme in 1933. She is the only full judge among the women now sitting in Chicago courts.

Mrs. Edith Sampson and Miss Helen F. McGillicuddy, both associate judges, were elected in 1962.

Mrs. Komasa, Mrs. Margaret Malley, and Mrs. Helen Kelleber were appointed as magistrates last year by the committee of Circuit Court judges under the new state judicial code.

OF the women except Tucker grew up in Chicago, attended De Paul or Northwestern law school, and are members of the Democratic Bar. Judge Tucker is a native of Indiana, a graduate of the University of Chicago Law School and a Republican.

Judge McGillicuddy of Family Court: "Only courts are open, so national service and loyalty to the court when judges are elected."

With their jobs as judges go impressive-looking black robes and handsome salaries. A Circuit Court judge gets \$29,000 a year; an associate judge, \$26,500, and a magistrate, \$16,000.

And now that they have made it to the bench, none of these women would be so unladylike as to say they do a better job than men do, except for offering more compassion.

Even Mrs. Sampson.

"THEY SAY I'm acid-tongued," says forthright Mrs. Sampson. "That's right, that's the way I am.

"They also say I'm a square," she said. "I used to resent that — now I hope I am one. I still believe in the simple rules, like the Golden Rule."

A short, fashionably dressed woman with a commanding presence — former representative to the United Nations — Mrs. Sampson sits in Landlord-Tenant court.

While hearing as many as 250 cases a day, she has gained a reputation for her compassion for defendants, many of them strangers to the ways of the city.

She said, "This place is so busy it could be like a cafeteria.

"Landlords may have their rights, but I don't want them to embroider those rights. People stand before me as equals, and I want to find out where the truth lies."

Mrs. Sampson said, "Some of these disadvantaged people have never had any attention

paid to them, and I get satisfaction out of giving them their day in court.

"If their wages are garmisheed, they may lose their jobs. I want to keep them off relief, to keep them self-supporting."

Judge Sampson can be firm, but often she leans over and says warmly to a defendant, "I want to help you."

Or she will give a lecture.

"Many of these people spend their money on things like TV sets," she explains. "I try to tell them those things are not as important as keeping a roof over their heads.

"I've been a Negro a long time," she said, "and I've lived among them. I can talk to them, and they understand me."

MAGISTRATE Margaret O'Malley says of the troubled people who appear before her in Family Court:

"The more you see of them, the more you realize that they aren't much different than anyone else — it's just that other people either get better breaks or were better able to take advantage of their breaks."

Mrs. Marilyn Komosa, sweet-faced mother of three who was assigned to Women's Court before being transferred recently to Traffic Court, speaks Spanish and Polish fluently, as well as English. But at first she didn't understand some of the earthy language used by defendants in her court.

"I had to ask my husband to explain it to me," she said.

Another part of the job of being a judge is long hours, as much as 20 hours a week outside of court — studying and reading to keep up with new legal decisions and giving speeches before civic and social groups.

But the long hours are not the most difficult thing judges have to face.

FAMILY COURT Judge Helen McGillicuddy, a tall, gregarious woman with bright blue eyes, says she thinks the biggest problem is "the tremendous responsibility."

She says: "It is natural for a human being to make up his mind about a situation right away, but when you are a judge you can't do this — you have to train yourself to listen to both sides of a case without prejudging."

She explained: "There wouldn't be much problem if a friend of yours appeared in your court as a defendant — you could ask for a change of venue. But when lawyers who are friends of yours appear before you in court, you have to strain to be impartial.

"A judge's life is a lonely life," she said. "The judge is the one who has to make a decision, and the judge is the one who has to stand on it."

Judge O'Malley of Family Court speaks of the responsibility, too.

"I remember when I was a case worker," she said. "I seemed to be rather free about threatening to send people to jail.

"Now that I actually have the power to send people to jail, I rarely mention it."

"I never look at TV," Judge O'Malley said. "None of the stories on TV can compare with what you see here. This is the place where you get the true truth.

"But if you can survive for a year — if you are not drowned by sorrow and indecision — it makes you feel very healthy."

BUT in spite of the problems, there isn't one woman among the six who doesn't like her job.

Judge Kelleber, who lives in Oak Park, says:

"Sometimes I'm tired when I get up in the morning, and then I come down here and get a lift out of working with the people."

Judge McGillicuddy said, "One of the most satisfying things about being a judge is to know that by working with the court's social workers and psychologists, you have had some part in the transformation of people.

"If I didn't feel there was hope with many of these people, I might feel a sense of loss."

Judge O'Malley is not above playfully mentioning another advantage of being a woman judge:

"I went to a party given for judges by 250 defense attorneys last year, and I was the only woman there.

"It was so wonderful, I told them never to go home."